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UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT Whatever or whomever you are researching, it is vitally important to understand the historical time frame. Remember the film 'Back to the Future' and television programmes in which there are time travellers? In much the same way the historian examining the past has to remember that people in other eras used different language, had different values, traditions and outlook. Hundreds of things change from generation to generation. All these factors affect how people react. People's attitude to religion is different in Ireland now than it was when Pope John Paul II visited Ireland in 1979 and people's religious practices were different again when Ireland hosted the Eucharistic Congress in 1932.

As a person of the new millennium you can't understand the actions of the past unless you understand the historical context. You must have an understanding of the era in which an event took place and the time when an individual lived. All history reflects the period in which it is written. The historian of this generation looks at his/her source material with a set of attitudes and beliefs that are at variance to those who came before. In turn, his/her perceptions and interpretations of the historical facts will be examined and even discredited by the historians of the 21st century.

It takes some time before events are recorded. Activists must be long dead before their material comes to light. You may be aware of the facts and background to the Irish Civil War but for many years these events were not taught in schools, perhaps this was because events were still too close to become dispassionate words in a school text. But the fact that the Irish Civil War was omitted from school books in 1950s Ireland gives you some idea of how history is written and how it takes time for current affairs to become part of the history of a nation. In his book *Another Country, Growing up in '50s Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan, 1998), Gene Kerrigan tells of his surprise to learn of the Irish Civil War when he was nineteen years of age.

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He writes:

🕒 I didn't know about the Civil War until I was nineteen. I found out about it watching the *Late Late Show* – 16 November 1968 – an Australian writer named Calton Younger – was there to discuss his book, titled *The Irish Civil War*. I watched, slightly puzzled at first, then more than a little agitated. What civil war? I had lately turned nineteen, five years out of school, making my way in the world, and I'd just discovered that there had been a civil war in my country only twenty-six years before I was born. – The day after that *Late Late Show*, I went digging down in a big old suitcase and pulled out my primary school history book. *A Junior History of Ireland*, by James Carty, published in 1959. Chapter 19 was titled 'From Easter Week to the Treaty'. And there endeth the lesson. Why was the Civil War left out of our school books? – And where our *Junior History* ended with the Treaty the senior book added a single paragraph in which Mr Carty wrote that 'the civil war broke out'. No background, no explanation, just one sentence: 'The Republican minority still continued to oppose the Treaty' and 'civil war broke out. No cause, no one made the decisions, it just kind of happened... Mr Carty's book belatedly and unwittingly taught me a lesson in a subject that wasn't on the curriculum: scepticism.

It will not be possible for some people to have access to original documentation. Prevented from reading source material at first hand without the taint, slant and focus of the era in which it was written, the scholar must be aware of who is writing the piece and how it is constructed. When researching - beware of half-quotations, quotations out of context, quotations that are truncated to underscore what the writer wishes to convey. In the past there were no references or footnotes in biographies. There was no identification between quotes from primary source material and second hand sources. Look for the type of source it is, is it from a secondary source, reliable, an eyewitness or someone who knew the key characters or a distant relative?

LETS LOOK AT AN EXAMPLE:

On Friday, July 18 1997 *The Daily Telegraph* contained a story:

£252,000 paid for Churchill's Letters Seventeen letters from Winston Churchill to his brother Jack about the disastrous Dardanelles campaign, which included the ill-fated landings at Gallipoli, fetched a total of more than £252,000 in London yesterday. The unpublished letters described by Sotheby's as "the most important series of letters by Churchill ever sold at auction", included one which fetched £53,200, an auction record for any single letter by Churchill. In it, Churchill refers to the Dardanelles and the war on the Western Front. "The war is terrible, the carnage grows apace and the certainty that no result will be reached this year fills my mind with melancholy thoughts. The youth of Europe - almost a whole generation - will be shorn away.

SOURCE & EVIDENCE MUST BE FROM A VALID & REPUTABLE SOURCE These letters were written by Churchill to his brother, private correspondence in which he wrote of his personal and private observations and was not inhibited as he would have been if he had been giving an interview for a newspaper or magazine or writing an official report.

WHAT DOES THE INFORMATION PROVE? WHAT IS ITS RELEVANCE? WHO SAID IT? WAS THAT PERSON AN EYEWITNESS OR A KEY PLAYER? This is an observation by Churchill, a key player. He was First Lord of the Admiralty at this time, and the disastrous Dardanelles campaign led to his resignation in May of 1915. It illustrates his feelings at the time of the event; it is not a recollection tainted by the passage of time. This article also illustrates how information can come to light many years after an event. In this case the material had been in the family's possession. The material was unpublished, therefore it was unseen by historians, who previously would have been speculating on Churchill's opinions and feelings at this time with no hard evidence of what he actually thought.

remember information can come to light many years after an event

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NEWSPAPERS-VITAL CLUES AND INFORMATION Researching in newspapers is the most time consuming research task and often a tedious job. To examine one year of a newspaper by scanning the text can take two or three hours. Often you are distracted by new stories like following the progress of a murder investigation or a wife who has absconded! Searching on microfilm is much more difficult when the pages of the newspaper are thin and the text is dense. Often the layout differs from paper to paper. It is hard work and often the end result may be that you find nothing. It is especially difficult if you are trying to locate something that is not in a library in your hometown. It is quite possible that you will not be able to find the newspaper in your hometown even if it was originally published there. As Ireland was a colony, papers often survive in the collection of the British Library in Colindale in London. It was compulsory for them to keep copies of newspapers after 1826.

USING THE EXAMPLE OF LIMERICK NEWSPAPERS There have been weekly newspapers published in Limerick since the 1740s but don't expect to find every issue surviving! Copies of these newspapers are now scattered in a number of different libraries and institutions in Limerick but also in Ireland, the UK and the US. Many libraries hold odd numbers of newspapers; they may have some complete runs but often there are many missing issues of 18th and 19th century newspapers. *The Daily Southern Advertiser 1880-1894* is an example of a paper that can't be found in Ireland apart from one issue in the Franciscan Library in Dublin. The surviving issues can be found in the British Library in London. *The Limerick Star* which ran for a year in the 1890s is another newspaper that can only be found in the British Library. Other newspapers have issues that are scattered in a number of Libraries. Issues of *The Limerick Weekly Echo and District Advertiser* published in Limerick in 1898 can be located in Limerick County Library, The National Library of Ireland and the British Library. Despite the difficulties, newspapers are a great source, written at the time of the event and giving ample material that may be quoted and may provide clues leading to other sources. They also give a good context in which to read how information was received at the time of the event, the historical context.

The Limerick Chronicle 29 April 1916

The news of the rebellion on 29th of April is referred to as the Dublin Disturbances or elsewhere 'The Trouble in Dublin.' The incident is not called a rebellion.

There are excerpts in Limerick newspapers from London newspapers. It is noted in the section on parliamentary debates that the information is censored. Mr Birrell stated that he was anxious that the information should not reach the neutral countries, which would give 'a false importance to what had taken place.'

The inaccuracies that were reported in the newspapers prove that you must remember that the information can be wrong. James Connolly is reported as being killed in the fighting. The truth was that he had been badly injured. It is stated that Patrick Pearse was injured but in fact he was unharmed.

THE LIMERICK CHRONICLE, SATURDAY

WAR.
A BRITISH
VESSEL.
STRIKES A MINE
Mediterranean.

CREW SAVED.
New Reported Missing
H-Bull Sunk
The Admiralty
Friday afternoon
of the British vessels
of the Mediterranean
and 25 others and 25
there are about 120 others
are sunk off the coast
of the Mediterranean
The crew were saved
by the British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels

and Verdun.
Army Efforts.
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
The British vessels
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The British vessels

THE DUBLIN
DISTURBANCES.
Discussion in Parliament
NATIONAL VOLUNTEERS
Assist Military.

The following is taken from an English news-
paper published on Thursday morning
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paper published on Thursday morning
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Debate in the
Lord
LORD LANSDOWN
IMPORTANT

In the House of Commons
The following is taken from an English news-
paper published on Thursday morning
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... Mr Asquith said that troops had arrived from Belfast and from England. The place called Liberty Hall had already been occupied by soldiers, and so had Stephens Green. Martial law had been proclaimed in Dublin city and county. Drastic action was being taken to secure the arrest of all concerned in the movement. Outside

Dublin the country was tranquil. Only three minor cases of disturbance had been reported. Steps had been taken to make our friends abroad aware of the real significance of the most recent German campaign ...

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USING NEWSPAPERS AS YOUR SOURCE MATERIAL An excellent example of the value of newspapers as a source is illustrated in the story of the Jewish pogrom in Limerick in 1904.

THE JEWISH POGROM IN LIMERICK 1904 In his book *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland*, (Cork University Press, 1998) Dermot Keogh makes use of newspapers to give a comprehensive account of what went on. It was the sermons given at the meeting of the Arch-confraternity at the Redemptorist's Church in the city that led to the boycotting of the Jewish traders and the departure of the majority of the community from Limerick. Although journalists were prevented from attending the meetings at the Arch-confraternity, the texts of Fr John Creagh's sermons were published. Michael Davitt, best known for his work with the Land League, defended the Jews, in 1903, while on a visit to Russia he had witnessed pogroms there. He wrote to the *Freeman's Journal*, criticising Fr Creagh. Fr Creagh then used the newspaper as the medium to reply. The *Limerick Chronicle* carried this report:

LIMERICK LEADER, WEDNESDAY EVENING, JANUARY 30, 1904

THE JEWS

A REPLY TO MR. DAVITT

Rev. J. Creagh, C.S.S.R., and the "Freeman's Journal" Letter

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS ON THE PRESENT SITUATION

At the weekly meeting of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family at the Redemptorist Church on Monday and Tuesday night, the Rev. Father Creagh, C.S.S.R., Spiritual Director, referred at length to the letter from Mr. Michael Davitt, which appeared in Monday's Freeman as the subject of Jewish trade in Limerick, to which allusion was drawn by Father Creagh at the Confraternity last week. At the beginning of his remarks Father Creagh said he desired it to be thoroughly understood that he entirely and fully disapproved any violence towards the Jews. Such

is indeed their right against them. Let us defend ourselves before these Jews, and let us only proceed against our trade. Again, Mr. Davitt writes:— "I do not mean to speak of you, which has been fully reported in the Limerick paper. I had the following words:— 'They saw in St. James the First Martyr and St. James the Apostle, who ever since he died he apparently suffered they did not believe in such Christian blood, and that was in the market and most cruel market, as to the case of the lady martyr, St. Elizabeth, who, though a mere child, they took and crucified, and so

... Father Creagh ... I warned you to beware of becoming the slaves of Jewish Usurers. I pointed out to you that the Jews were ever the greatest haters of the name of Jesus Christ, and of everything Christian. I told you how they had wormed themselves into every form of business—that, whereas

they had come here a miserable tribe, they had enriched themselves upon our poverty, and I asked you to consider well whether or not we were to allow them to fasten themselves so tightly on us that we and our children should be the helpless victims of their rapacity ...

LET'S EXAMINE THIS SOURCE:

LOOK FOR QUOTATIONS Note the language employed by Fr Creagh lends itself very well to quotation:

"I warned you to beware of becoming slaves of Jewish usurers".

His argument is contained, succinctly in this piece: 'The only reason' Fr Creagh states that he "took up this question was merely to save confraternity men from the ruinous trade of the Jews."

It is important to note the tone of the sermon; he describes his critics as "those who had been duped by the Jews". Father Creagh uses the age-old anti-Semitic argument against the Jews. "They slew St Stephen, the first martyr and St James, the apostle - Nowadays they dare not kidnap and slay Christian children; but they will not hesitate to - expose them to a longer and cruel martyrdom by taking the clothes off their backs and the bit out of their mouths."

Note the tone of these quotations. Do they sound like direct quotations? Do you think that this is a distorted source? Are there any other sources for material written by Fr Creagh or letters from this period so that you can see for yourself if it sounds like direct quotation? Failing this look at his words are they typical or untypical sentiments of the day? Remember that you have the benefit of hindsight and that Fr Creagh lived in the period before the holocaust.

LOOK FOR REFERENCES TO OTHER SOURCE MATERIAL In this piece there are other newspapers referred to *The Daily Independent*, *The Munster News* and *the Freeman's Journal* - leads for further research.

LOOK AT THE NEWSPAPER AS A SOURCE We know from other sources that the Arch-confraternity was a powerful group of Catholics in Limerick at this time. Their number was 6,000 in 1904. It is important to look at the power of the priest in society at this time. Many members of the confraternity would have been illiterate. Was the publication of Fr Creagh's sermons due to the controversial content of his speeches or because of the power of the Arch-confraternity in Limerick? Find out were other sermons published at this time.

The fact that these sermons were published brought the story to a different audience. The story became national news, check the reports outside Limerick. Was Michael Davitt the only critic of the priest's beliefs?

evaluate the data *Primary Evidence*

USING NEWSPAPERS AS SOURCES - SOME OF THE PITFALLS

Newspapers are too often used as the only sources that there are! Take note that newspapers reflect a particular slant, agenda or standpoint and that news stories are reported in a certain way. It must be remembered that quotations in newspapers vary widely in their accuracy. But sometimes, the slant or the focus of the newspaper is not that obvious. If you are quoting, it is important to state that you are aware of the newspaper's standpoint and if possible to give a range of accounts from different newspapers. You may know the difference in the newspapers of today, such as, the difference in the reporting in *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Sun* but you may not think of the type of newspaper that you are quoting from when it dates back to the 1840s, is in the library and doesn't look the same as a tabloid of today.



PRIMARY SOURCES: ORIGINAL MATERIAL The starting point for many scholars is secondary - written sources - but the interesting and exciting role of a reSearcher starts when they explore primary sources. When you gather the material yourself your work will be original. Where possible revisit the author's primary sources and draw your own conclusions.

We have already discussed what are primary sources: diaries, letters, bills, accounts, legal documents, songs and poetry, gravestones, paintings, photographs and oral accounts.

TRY AND FIND THE CLUES The seeking out of documents is a challenge – Think of yourself as a journalist or a detective – seeking out the clues. It is important to **pay attention to detail**, the insignificant details.

ASK YOURSELF What official documents might someone need during their lifetime, a birth certificate, possibly a marriage certificate, a death certificate – school records – religious records – legal documentation, house deeds, land deeds, wills. A person will appear in the census returns and might have professional records, educational documentation.

You must apply your mind to where and who might hold material. Also keep in mind the extended family and changes such as the fact that material is not always passed to the eldest son. Also, bear in mind the loss of the family home and the fact that people move house several times during their lifetime. Family heirlooms are often scattered or given to extended family and friends.

Where did the person live when they died? – Does a relative live in the family home? – Did the material go to the eldest son – or perhaps the only daughter?

Contact all the family members – You never know the second cousin in America may have what you are looking for. The most unlikely person may have kept the material just because they were interested in history.

Mostly people do not look for the raw material of history from private collections – the material is normally consulted in an archive or library. State papers are located in the National Archives in Dublin. See: *The Directory of Irish Archives*, edited by Seamus Helferty and Raymond Refaussé (Four Courts Press, 1999) for listings of archives and libraries in Ireland.

If you are fortunate enough to locate original source material. Well Done!!!

But there may be difficulties. If the material is in private hands, it will be undocumented and unsorted. You will have to put it into chronological order, decipher handwriting and find out as much as you can about the writer and the context of the letter and that is before you get started!

If material is located in an archive that part of the work is completed. However, it will still take hours sifting through indexes, calling up material that may or may not be relevant. Many documents are hand-written and the older they are the harder they are to read – so always give yourself plenty of time when visiting an archive.

Remember that even if you are the 2nd, 3rd or even 300th person to look at a document, your individual contribution is the key. You will glean different information than the people who have examined it before you.

WHAT YOU SHOULD LOOK OUT FOR WHEN EXAMINING DOCUMENTS

Beware! History is always more complex than it appears at first. The more information that is uncovered the more complex it becomes. It is never as it seems. Questioning sources is a must! Official documents or documents in custody can be falsified or altered. You also must be aware that what has survived is not the entire picture. Every day material is lost to the historical record.

THE LOSS OF MATERIAL The greatest loss to Irish researchers was the burning of the Public Records Office in the Four Courts during the Civil War in 1922, when historical records dating back to the fifteenth century were destroyed.

Finding material that dates from the 20th century can also be problematic. In the early years of the state, a number of records of a sensitive nature were destroyed, including many papers relating to the Civil War. Until public record legislation was enacted in 1991 Government Departments were free to destroy files in order to create storage space.

The destruction of material by descendants is also a problem. Often a letter containing one line of personal information may be burnt sacrificing the rest of the material that is of historical interest. The life story of Dorothy Macardle, best known as the author of *The Irish Republic*, is worthy of a biography, but it will never be produced as her personal papers were destroyed. She never married and her brother, who was not interested in hoarding, destroyed her papers at the time of her death.

There is a burden for the descendants of famous people. Many people find it intrusive to have scores of researchers constantly trying to make contact. The solution is to give the material to an archive or to sell it. The papers are often sold to the highest bidder, frequently to collections outside Ireland. The result is that Irish scholars are often unable to consult this material, as it is rare for history students to obtain funding for their research and there are only tiny advances for 'academic' books.



THE MINE EXPLOSION IN THE FOUR COURTS, JUNE 30, 1922.

evaluate the data *History in the 21st Century*

ORAL HISTORY: THE USE OF FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY? Oral history is the information that is passed by word of mouth. In the strict historical sense it is a flawed source as recollection is imperfect, anecdotal and subjective. Despite this it is a vital source for any historical research of the 20th century. The 20th century will be within living memory for some time to come.

There will be less documentation for the late 20th century with the decline in letter writing, the use of telephones and Email for communication. Records kept on computer will be wiped rather than preserved for posterity. There is also the possibility of the loss of material as people move many times within their lifetime and today there are few extended families living together with several generations in the one household.

THE VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY Interviews yield wonderful material. Older people have different phrases and ways of speaking and their quotations add colour to academic texts. There are the 'real voices' which give a sense of immediacy to an event. There is also the important aspect of social history, gaining knowledge of the customs, values, ways of life at a particular period of time. Official documents record the factual information of an event; someone who was there may be able to explain why it happened and connect it to other events.

SET ABOUT LOCATING AND COLLECTING - BEFORE YOU START

Write all you know about the topic before the interview or construct the outline of what you propose to have in your finished essay – this will illustrate the gaps in your knowledge and the areas that you want to concentrate on. With the passage of the 20th century there has been a huge change in social structures and protocol. A teenager can now address their elders by their first names even at a first meeting. It is important to remember that there is an etiquette that should be adopted when one is interviewing an elderly person. It is important to telephone or write a letter in advance. When you visit, a gift would be appropriate, as you must remember that they are doing you a favour by sharing their time and their memories with you. In an age when it

is more and more common to pay everyone for his or her time, the person you are interviewing could feel exploited. This is particularly important if you are being paid to produce an article, write a book, or make a documentary.

Access to people is still relatively easy in Ireland. People are listed in the telephone book and people pass on numbers and addresses with a readiness that is not there in other countries. It is only a matter of time until things change here. Remember therefore that writers and historians have many calls on their time and answer many queries for people with little thanks. If you have made an effort to approach them formally, they may be more helpful to you. You must be prepared to make friends with people you contact and to be open about your own life. There is no point in being cold and aloof and refusing to answer questions if you are there to ask the person for information! It is important to make several visits to a person to build up rapport.

☪ A number of years ago I interviewed a lady and her sister who were both in their nineties: one of the ladies was Lily Thewliass, a former prisoner in Kilmainham Gaol during the Civil War. Both ladies were very polite but wary as I was a stranger - they asked me to come again and told me that on my next visit I would be given tea. It taught me that you must not expect everyone to welcome you. Later I reflected that these women had lived during the Civil War, and one had been imprisoned. At that time they had not been able to trust any stranger with information on the 'movement'. And although almost seventy years had passed, to them this time was only yesterday.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW When you are taping someone it is important that you play the tape continuously during the interview. Much of what is recorded will not be utilised but it is important that you do not lose any information. A conversation is not structured. To impose a rigid question and answer scenario will lead to a stilted and less productive interview. To put the person at ease and to facilitate you when you come to write, start by asking basic questions, such as the person's age at the time of the event in question. Ask details such as the names of the key characters, nicknames and the former names of places or ask for a description of the locality at the time at which the event happened, this can help the person to focus their memory and enables them to set the scene.

It is important that you study the period in question - know the key dates and events. You can then offer this information to the interviewee in order to jog their memory, but do judge the situation. It is good for the person to know that you have "done your homework" especially if you are talking to an academic or an expert in their field. But don't throw the interviewee by inserting

evaluate the data *research@home*

your own opinions and talking too much. Having done your research you will be told a lot of what you know already. Don't be rude, listen and look interested, there may be the exact information you require at the end of the long story or a throw away remark that would make an ideal quote.

Guide the interview – often a person has told the same story time and time again over a period of years, in the same way, with the same punch-lines. The good interviewer will get new information to come to light. Be realistic about what you expect any person to remember after the passage of so many years.

🕒 I once visited a lady who had been a member of Cumann na mBan when she was sixteen. She told me that she had only attended a few meetings organised by another lady called Mary Twomey but could remember no other information. Sometime later a collection of photographs came to light that had belonged to Mary Twomey. I was anxious to know if Mary Twomey appeared in any of them and asked this lady could I bring them to her. The lady protested that many years had passed and not to bother to come and see her. I insisted and when I arrived I was disappointed when she could not identify her – as she said her only memory was a woman who was tall and with dark hair. A little while later she showed me a family photograph taken ten years previously. Deviously she asked me to identify her daughter who was also at the interview. I looked at the daughter and then singled her out in the photograph. The old lady had the last laugh. She said ‘‘I thought so – that is not this daughter but her sister, people often make that mistake – they are very alike’. ‘‘Now’, she said, ‘‘you came here asking me to identify a lady I saw twice over sixty years ago and my daughter is sitting in front of you and you can't pick her out in a photograph taken just ten years ago.’’ I learned my lesson!

HOW TO USE THE MATERIAL When it comes to using the material, it is important that the reader is aware that the material is taken from direct speech. If possible you should use footnotes and endnotes. If it is not feasible for you to use this form of notation, it is important that the reader/listener is aware of what is your opinion and what you have surmised from what was said in the interview.

WHEN YOU ARE WRITING HISTORY LOOK OUT FOR:

Comparison and Contrast: You must show a range of views and consider the options of a number of commentators. Read widely, contrast the evidence given by all parties as it is often necessary to give both sides of a story. And finally come to your own considered conclusions.

Source and Evidence: The source and evidence must be from a valid and reputable source. Ask yourself what does the information prove? What is its relevance? Who said it? Was that person an eyewitness or a key player? The historian has the benefit of hindsight. Take for example a political event - newspapers often give an inaccurate story; cabinet minutes might be a better source or even a personal letter written by the politician during the event in question. Most of this material will not come to light until many years after the event.